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Critical transitions in belief and identity

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Abstract

Sudden personal ruptures figure prominently in literature, religious scripture, and “great man” historical narratives. Scientists experience sudden insights. Religious devotees abandon their faiths—or find new ones. Political organizers switch parties. Are these restricted to the lives of a few exceptional individuals—or are they widespread, commonplace, a recurring feature of human experience? To address these questions, we conducted a survey of people’s experiences of sudden transformation across a range of life domains: morality, aesthetics, mathematical or scientific belief, religion, politics, social life, and mental health. Sudden personal transformations were surprisingly widespread. The magnitude of a rupture was associated with changes in social networks, and with changes in belief dissonance. In other words, new friends or challenging beliefs could precipitate large personal transformations. Critical transitions in the human experience may reflect universal dynamical mechanisms.